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Congress of the United States
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INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS COMMITTEE
Ranking Democratic Member

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Human Rights Caucus

Member, United States Holocaust Memorial Council

September 14, 2005

The Honorable Michael Chertoff
Department of Homeland Security
Washington, D.C. 20528

Dear Mr. Secretary:

In addition to the human horror and devastation in Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama, a disturbing image appears on our television screens and our newspapers. Forcing evacuees to choose between being rescued or remaining with their pets is heartbreaking, and the plight of the animals left behind is tragic.

We realize our top priority is to save citizens from the hellish conditions in the flooded areas. However, leaving a pet behind can unnecessarily complicate the rescue process. To be sure, we are greatly concerned about the treatment of animals in this disaster recovery.

We would be interested in knowing whether the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), through its Emergency Management Planning Grants Program or other programs, has an overall plan to save the thousands of animals threatened by natural disasters. We also would like to better understand the criteria for providing evacuation, shelter or housing plans for pets and other animals. If indeed there is a plan to protect pets, it appears to have been an abject failure. If there are no plans, we would appreciate your thoughts on how to prevent these occurrences in future disaster recovery efforts.

Pet owners have relied upon the extraordinary efforts of such organizations as the Humane Society of the United States, the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals and the Homeless Cat Network and others who have poured in over 500 rescuers and have saved over 4,000 animals. Additionally, we have been told that the Army's 82nd Airborne has adjusted its guidelines to allow evacuees to bring their pets, which is positive news. We are also pleased to see that the FEMA website and informational materials appropriately address pet concerns. Tips on how to handle events before, during and after a disaster are useful suggestions, but we are concerned that this is simply not enough.

While pet owners bear primary responsibility for disaster preparedness, post-disaster rescues must take pets into account. FEMA suggests taking one's pets during evacuations but the prohibition or inability of many evacuation shelters to allow pets means that many pets and citizens will be left behind. Providing viable shelter for pets allows pets and their owners to evacuate and eliminates the difficulty of pets left behind to fend for themselves.

We would very much appreciate your review, careful consideration, and response to this inquiry as the nation reassesses its emergency response capabilities. Thank you for your attention.

Cordially,



TOM LANTOS, M.C.

Co-Chair

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